The Second Pendragon Emperor:

Episodes and Conflicts in the reign of

Constantine II Pendragon

by Matthew Gordon MacNeil

The Second Pendragon Emperor: Episodes and Conflicts in The reign of Constantine II Pendragon

By Matthew Gordon MacNeil

The Quest For Olwen

Notes:

This version of the story is based off of my own understanding

with regards to my research into the Arthurian legend. I believe many of the stories connected to Arthur happened not in his lifetime or to him but to his successor and nephew, Constantine II.

For anyone unfamiliar with my Arthurian work, I personally believe much of the Arthurian legends are true, Magic and all, and my Arthurian series is my attempts to write a full history of the Arthurian Empire, from its rise under Arthur Pendragon until its fall in 683 AD.

Of course, as I always do with my historical nonfiction, I want to state these are just my opinions and if you disagree that's fine by me, I hope you can enjoy these stories (and if you feel so inclined to read more) the series as a whole when it is complete regardless.

During the early days of Constantine Pendragon's reign, shortly after defeating the conspiracy of the Saxon King Aella and his cousins Melehan and Melou, another cousin, this time on Constantine's paternal grandmother's side, needed the aid of the court.

This cousin's name was Culwch, grandson of Igraine's younger sister Goleuddydd and her husband Kilydd, a governor in

North Wales and like the Pendragons a descendant of Brutus of Troy.

Culwch desired to wed Olwen, a daughter of Ysbaddan, a giant in the Welsh mountain country, but knew alone he stood little chance of succeeding. Ysbaddan was known to be a harsh and cruel man, to humans and fellow giants alike, and the young Welsh Knight decided to seek the help of his cousin the Emperor, for if anyone could help him in his quest it was Constantine.

Taking with him gifts of silver knives and gold crosses Culwch departed North Wales riding for Loegria, to Camelot the Golden, capital of Britain and the Arthurian Empire.

Reaching the city gates at nightfall Culwch tried persuading the soldiers on duty to open up but they refused, stating they could not open it.

"Open up,"

Culwch said.

"I will not,"

Answered the soldier,

"Only a son of a King can enter at these hours."

"If you will not allow me entry,"

Culwch protested,

"I'll bring disgrace upon you."

And so it went, the two going back and forth until finally, whether from realizing who the Knight was or simply growing tired of the man, the soldier, named Glewlwyd, a warrior in Constantine's personal guard, went into the Imperial palace to inform the Emperor.

Constantine, fast asleep, did not take kindly to being disturbed but once it became clear it was a cousin his grumpiness subsided and he ordered Culwch to be brought in at once.

Returning to the gate Glewlwyd ordered it opened. Culwch rode through, riding straight for the palace without an official escort. Once there he dismounted and bowed at Constantine's feet.

"Hail to you, Emperor of Rome,"

He said, placing his right hand on his breast,

"Thank you for the honour of seeing me."

"Greetings to you, cousin,"

Constantine said, taking the younger man by the shoulders and raising him to his feet,

"Come inside and eat breakfast with me. You've had a long journey here."

"Thank you, your Highness, but I've come not for feast or drink, but to ask a request of you."

Constantine looked at him again, nodding.

"Whatever you wish, I'll do my best to obtain it, but first let us eat."

The Emperor took his cousin by the arm and led him into the palace, followed by his bodyguards and Knights of the Round Table.

Sitting down to eat the Emperor and Culwch enjoyed a hardy breakfast consisting of eggs, venison, and glasses of wine to wash it down.

As they ate Constantine questioned his cousin again about what kind of request he had. The Welshman took a bite of venison, mulling over how best to explain what he sought, knowing it was no simple task.

"I seek the hand of Ysbaddan's daughter Olwen in marriage and I ask that you help me. I ask this also of your warriors, those both new and those veterans of Arthur's great armies."

Of those who served in the British army from Arthur's time, the greatest and most unique, if one could call him so, was

Morfran ap Tegid. One of the few survivors of Camlann, Morfran's reason for survival was, so legend said, that his ugliness so terrified his enemies that they mistook him for a literal Demon on the battlefield and did their best to avoid him, allowing him to kill many as a consequence.

Other veterans of Camlann still serving in the Round Table Order were:

Sanddef, who was renowned, even in old age, for his great beauty. His handsomeness was such that it was said no man (or woman) could refuse him anything. A stark contrast to the hideousness of Morfran indeed.

Cynwl, a man noted for his piety so much so that in later years he was called 'the Saint.' He was the last of Arthur's men to talk with him before he passed away on the field of Camlann.

Uhtred son of Erim, a Germanic warrior from the Angle tribe.

Eus son of Erim, Uhtred's brother.

Henwas son of Erim, Uhtred's brother.

Henbentyr son of Erim, Uhtred's brother.

Sigiti son of Erim, Uhtred's youngest brother.

The sons of Erim, though Germanic in origin, were loyal to Arthur and his vision of Britain as a place for all peoples and so served his successor to continue his legacy.

Teiti the Old, a Chieftain from the North who's lands were swallowed in flooding. Arthur welcomed him and therefore he fought for him.

Lancelot, among the oldest of the Knights still serving in his eighties.

And several more, all of whom Culwch hoped would aid him in this quest.

Constantine was left a bit stunned by his cousin's request. Ysbaddan was known to him of course, all giants of Britain were. Most lived in peace and stayed well away from human settlement, but he was known to be abrasive and hostile at times.

He drank some of his wine. Culwch's request wouldn't be easy. Not at all.

"Give me time, cousin. I'll see what I can arrange."

"I'll give you a year."

Culwch stated, and Constantine accepted this time limit, sending out Knights the following morning to bring Olwen to Camelot, but Ysbaddan stoutly refused and chased them off.

When they returned to the Imperial capital and told Constantine of what transpired Culwch was so disheartened that he swore to go himself to take his beloved by his very

own sword.

Constantine, concerned for his cousin's safety, talked him down from this rash decision and pledged to go with him with a band of Knights comprised of the best in Britain.

Calling upon Kynddelig the Guide, the best scout in the Imperial legions, the Emperor sent him out to find the best way to approach Ysbaddan's territory, not wanting to give the giant the wrong idea or possibly lead his men into a deadly ambush.

On this expedition also went Gwalchmai the son of Gawain, who, like his father, was a fine Knight and one of Britain's best swordsmen. If Constantine hoped to achieve his goal he needed Gwalchmai at his side.

The band rode from Camelot at first light and headed into Wales, entering the North of the country a day or so later. They traveled until coming upon an open plain where, upon a cliff's edge, they saw a wonderous castle.

A marvel of architecture, the party was certain it must've belonged to Ysbaddan, so they made haste to it. They rode for the rest of the day but got no closer to their destination.

Stopping for the night the band set up camp on the plain, all still transfixed on the castle. Such a wonder. By morning the men rode out once more, Constantine at their head, and yet

again drew no closer to the castle.

Not an untypical thing to happen when dealing with creatures born of Magic such as giants, but the Emperor and his men kept on, hoping to defy the Magic at play.

In all it took them three whole days to break past the barrier keeping them in place, and when they finally did reach the castle they beheld a large flock of sheep, so thick it was nearly impossible to pass through them.

Near the castle, sitting on a rock, was a herdsman and his pet mastiff, who watched the Knights advance curiously. The herdsman wore rugged skins made of animal hides. He looked human in appearance but this was deceiving for the man was no human at all, but a Fairy in disguise.

Before reaching the herdsman the band of Knights stopped, some concerned the mastiff, a big and ferocious looking beast, would attack them should they advance further.

The debate went on until one of their number, Menw, a Druid as well as a warrior, promised to cast a sleeping spell upon the dog so he would not harm anyone.

With that matter put to rest Constantine led the band up to the herdsman who remained still on his rock perch, not seeming to be afraid one bit.

"How do you fare, herdsman?"

The Emperor asked.

"I fare just as well as you."

The man said in reply.

"Do you work for the Lord of the castle above us?"

"Truly you are a stupid one,"

The herdsman spat in disdain,

"Everyone knows this is the castle of mighty Ysbaddan."

Unfazed by the insult Constantine continued the discussion civilly, learning that this herdsman, while not the giant himself of course, claimed to be his foster brother Custennin. He worked for Ysbaddan guarding his flocks as the giant dispossessed him of his own fortune and forced him into servitude.

"And who might you be?"

The cranky man asked.

"Emissaries from the Emperor,"

Constantine smiled,

"Here to seek the hand of Olwen in marriage for his cousin."

"Do not do this. None who seek her hand will survive. Ysbaddan will not allow her to marry anyone."

But this did not dissuade the party and so the Fairy man rose from his rock and went his own way with his dog, disappearing into thin air as they watched in astonishment.

Pushing onward Constantine's band made their way around the cliffs and found an old dwelling. Suddenly a woman came running out, fast and sleek, taking all by surprise.

Menw, pulling out a piece of wood he carried, quickly threw it into the face of the woman who tried catching it, only to discover it transformed from wood to a coil of rope, binding her hands so she couldn't do harm.

At the dwelling door Custennin appeared, welcoming them inside. The woman, still bound by Menw's Magic, was his wife, and on his urging she prepared a meal for their guests.

As they sat down to eat Gwalchmai, noticing Custennin's boy sitting beside his mother dour faced, asked his name, without knowing that such a question bit at the heart of the Fairy man's wife.

She explained how that their boy was in fact the last son they had, the three others were dead, murdered by the hand of their uncle, and she expected him to meet the same fate.

To this Gwalchamai offered his support, vowing to protect their son from the giant's wrath.

In thanks for this assurance the Fairy wife explained that

every Saturday morning Olwen came down from the castle to wash and stayed awhile.

Seeing an opportunity to accomplish his promise to his cousin Constantine asked permission to stay the week and wait for Olwen. The herdsman, while not overjoyed at the idea, agreed on the promise that the Emperor and his warriors would protect his last child, to which Constantine immediately accepted.

That Saturday Olwen, as the herdsman's wife said, came down from the castle. She wore a silk dress the colour of flame, her hair a bright yellow blonde. Olwen was a beautiful woman, there's no question, none more fairer in all of North Wales in those days.

Unlike her father she was human in shape. How or why is not known, and perhaps it is best not to ask why lest we open a can of worms.

When she entered her uncle's home Olwen, seemingly with no shyness or wariness, sat down beside Culwch. The young Knight, overcome with passion by the sight of her (a common experience for many men who looked upon her), burst out that she was who he would marry, declaring his undying love on the spot.

Gods know what Constantine and the others thought of this, but they said nothing, simply looked on as Olwen looked at Culwch, studying his face and armour.

When she did speak it was not in rebuke or disgust, but rather she told him that if he truly wanted her hand in marriage he needed to go to her father himself and ask for her hand. If her father gave him any quest in exchange he must accept it without question. Should he refuse, Olwen warned, he, and by extension his companions, would be lucky to escape with their heads attached to their bodies.

To this Culwch agreed, Constantine as well. So, when Olwen finished washing up the band followed her back up into the giant's castle, only to be attacked by several guards and watch dogs set upon them by Ysbaddan, believing them bandits wishing to hold Olwen for ransom.

Constantine and his Knights made short work of these threats, striding forward into the hall where the giant Lord resided, the Emperor leading the way, Excalibur in hand, the Magical blade shimmering in the candle light.

"Greetings Lord Ysbaddan,"

Constantine said approaching the giant's high seat.

"Who are you?"

Ysbaddan asked.

"I am Emperor Constantine, your Lord, and these are my friends, Knights of the Round Table. We've come to ask for the hand of your daughter Olwen in marriage for my cousin Culwch, a descendant of Amleth and Brutus of Troy."

Suddenly the giant snatched up a poisoned spear at his side and hurled it at Culwch, but Gwalchamai was faster, catching it in midair and throwing it back at the giant, piercing his knee.

Ysbaddan went on a rant, cursing Culwch as a son in law and the smith who forged the spear, an irony given had he succeeded in killing Culwch he would have praised said smith.

"Give us your daughter,"

Constantine said again, still calm,

"We will pay her bride price. If you do not, I will take your attempt at murder as treason and you will be executed on the spot."

Ysbaddan, arrogant and confident in his abilities, grew enraged at Constantine's supposed superiority and picked up another spear, hurling it at the Emperor himself.

Menw, using his Magic, deflected the projectile and sent it into the giant's chest, puncturing his heart. In a spasm of pain Ysbaddan died, a fool to the last.

With the giant dead Constantine asked Olwen if she wished to marry Culwch, to which she agreed, seeing little prospects in North Wales by herself.

The Emperor handed the castle and the Lordship to Custennin and his family, having them swear loyalty to the Crown before departing for Camelot.

In the coming days Culwch and Olwen prepared for their wedding, Constantine helping them by providing funds and refreshments.

When the day came it was a wonderful time, full of merriment, friendship, and music, Melissa regaling the Court with songs she knew from her homeland of Gaul.

Culwch and Olwen's marriage proved to be a happy one, and the young Welsh Knight served his cousin faithfully the rest of his life.

The Green Man of Avalon

The Otherworld's involvement in Britain predates Arthurian times by many centuries, but some of the most important and interesting accounts, in this author's opinion, occurred during

the reigns of the Pendragon Emperors, particularly during the reigns of the first Emperor, Arthur Pendragon, and the second, his nephew Constantine.

The tale of the Green Man or Green Knight of Avalon took place in the first years of Constantine's reign not too long after he won the hand of Olwen for his cousin Culwch.

In Camelot, capital of the Empire and greatest city in the West at that time, Constantine and his closest friends and Generals celebrated Christmas together.

They feasted, sang songs, held mock duels for fifteen days starting on Christmas eve. It was a merry time, one that allowed all to forget the stresses of governance and military life for a little while.

Culwch and Olwen were there. Aidan Mac Gabran, King of Scotland. Galahad and Lancelot. Melora Pendragon and her husband Orlando as well as all of the other children of Arthur. Many others came too from Iceland, Denmark, Ireland, Norway, Greece, and other parts of the Empire, filling the halls of the Imperial palace and the streets.

Right up until New Years eve the party, so to speak, continued, with Constantine leading the festivities. His rule so far, beset as it had been by the invasion of Aella and the Barbarian conspiracy, had been good. His subjects across his

lands from Britain to Italy and as far afield as Arabia and North America were happy under him, viewing him as a worthy successor to Arthur.

On New Years eve morning the Emperor led his family and friends who were Christian to church to hear Mass. Here they sung hymns and praised their Saviour while outside their Pagan friends kept up drinking and feasting among themselves, allowing them their time with their God.

When church ended the nobles exchanged gifts with each other and kept up their fun until suppertime that evening when, at the head of his table, Constantine held one last great feast.

He waited until everyone else was served before he ate his own food. Watching his friends enjoy their meal made him happy beyond measure, he thanked God for the opportunity to serve such a great people.

A few seats from him sat Gwalchmai, the young Knight telling stories of his father Gawain's adventures and of his own exploits. Constantine, always fond of tales of battle and heroics, listened eagerly, remembering his own father's stories of fighting alongside his brother during Arthur's war against the Saxon invaders.

Cador told Constantine how the Britons destroyed the Saxon

forces at the Battle of Badon Hill, one of the greatest victories Arthur ever achieved, and it is this story which inspired him to become a Knight liks his father and uncle, so listening to Gwalchmai made him nostalgic for those earlier times, putting a smile on his face.

Suddenly, as the Emperor and his friends ate their fill, the doors of the palace were thrown open by themselves, sending the guards tumbling to the floor. Constantine and his men rose to their feet, swords drawn, startled to see what came in.

A large man, almost gigantic in size, green of skin, rode in on an equally green horse. He wore no armour, but simple clothing, all that stood out being the battleaxe strapped to his back.

It was apparent this man was no human, his skin and horse giving away his Fairy origins, but none knew why he had come.

Broad chested and powerfully built, it was clear he was a Fairy Knight, one chosen by the monarchs of Avalon to serve their Kingdom as warriors.

His beard, almost bush like, laid on his chest.

Riding close to the table the Fairy Knight looked neither at Constantine or any other man or woman but looked upwards.

"Where is the King of this island?"

He asked, and then his green eyes came down to search the faces of those assembled there, looking over each person with curiosity.

Constantine indicated he was, he then asked why the man had interrupted their last day of celebration.

To this the Fairy Knight smiled.

"I've come,"

He explained,

"To offer a challenge to any who wish to take it up."

"What is this challenge?"

Constantine questioned him.

"A simple matter. I will allow any man who wishes to try to cut off my head. In return I ask that they let me cut off theirs in a year's time in Avalon."

Once they heard the nature of the challenge all stared in disbelief at the man, for all knew that, while long lived and near Immortal in human terms, Fairies were not in fact invincible. They could, and did, die. None rose to accept the challenge.....

None except Gwalchmai, that is.

The son of Gawain, always wishing to prove his bravery and

believing it would be easy enough to chop off the Fairy Knight's head and kill him, rose up and accepted the challenge.

At this Constantine tried talking him down but the prideful Knight refused to listen and so the Fairy man stepped down off his horse, got on his knees, and offered Gwalchmai his bare neck.

Gwalchmai wasted no time in bringing his sword down and slicing the Fairy's head clean off, but despite his expectations the man did not fall dead or, it seemed, show any sign of pain at all. Instead he reached out, picked up his head, and reattached it to his body before standing up.

The Fairy Knight gave his axe to Gwalchmai as an reward for having the nerve to take up his challenge and then reminded him of his commitment to venture to Avalon in a year's time. With that done the Knight left Camelot, leaving the entire Imperial court in disbelief and disquiet.

Soon however, as New Years eve passed and New Years day and the holidays ended, things returned to normal in the Imperial Palace, Constantine and his Knights forgetting what took place.

But, true to his word, when a year passed Gwalchmai, as he said he would do, received permission from Constantine to

ride out for Avalon to honour his part of the agreement. One wonders if the Emperor and the other nobles questioned if he would return.

If they did, they said nothing of it.

Gwalchmai rode for days until, in the North of Britain, he took a dirt path suggested by a local Saxon Chieftain which was said to be a Fairy road.

Local lore turned out to be true and so the Knight ended up in the Kingdom of Avalon, coming out on the other side in front of a Temple with a burial mound beside it.

Next to it sat the Fairy Knight sharpening an axe.

Without hesitation Gwalchmai dismounted and walked forward to meet the man. There was no greeting, no 'well mets', instead he got on his knees and bared his neck.

The Fairy Knight lifted his axe to deliver the blow but, just as he was about to bring it down he noticed Gwalchmai flinch. Amused by this the Fairy mocked him and prepared to strike a second time.

The insult stung and Gwalchmai steeled himself for death, preferring to die bravely than as a coward.

He saw the glint of the axe as it started to swing but this time he stayed calm, accepting his fate.

Again, the Fairy Knight didn't deliver a blow.

The man then explained he was testing an Imperial Knight's resolve, wanting to see if a member of the Round Table was as strong willed as the stories suggested.

Furious at this, believing it another insult, Gwalchmai jumped to his feet and grabbed his sword and shield from his horse, but the Fairy Knight only laughed, disappearing.

Left by himself in a strange land the son of Gawain, sensing he should not over stay his welcome, rode back the way he came, reaching British soil soon after and making haste back to Camelot.

Received warmly by Constantine and the others Gwalchmai related his story, which was dutifully written down by the Emperor's Court Historians.

He admitted he flinched but none blamed him and, in honour of his achievement of surviving such an ordeal Constantine ordered that from then on all Knights of the Round Table would wear a green sash to commemorate Gwalchmai's encounter with the Green Man of Avalon.

The Marriage of Constantine Pendragon

In early 589 the Imperial Court in Camelot faced a worrying problem. The Emperor was unmarried and did not, it appeared, wish to look for a suitable spouse.

Constantine, still getting used to the reins of governance, gave little thought to courting women, whether they be the daughters of Britain's nobles or the dozens of eligible noblewomen across the Empire.

Aidan Mac Gabran's daughter, Maithgamma, was of suitable age, as well the daughter of Irish High King Aed mac Ainmuirech, both of which would have been good matches for the Emperor, Mac Gabran and Mac Ainmuirech being loyal vassals and men dedicated to keeping Arthur's vision alive.

But he refused both and continued to live as a bachelor, focusing his energy on running the vast Empire his uncle left him.

The importance of marriage didn't, it should be noted, escape Constantine. He needed to ensure the royal succession as he had no siblings to succeed him and his cousins, the children of Arthur, weren't willing to take up the Crown.

Other descendants of Brutus could, in theory, be put forward, but the lengthy process it would take to find a suitable candidate was risky. As seen in Constantine's appointment,

the delay in naming Arthur's successor allowed threats to rise in the Empire and nearly saw it collapse, so it was in the best interests of everyone involved that the Emperor marry and produce children as soon as possible.

Constantine knew this. He accepted his responsibility, but thought his energies should be put into running his realm, he was young he still had time to settle down and marry, and so pushed aside the advice from his advisors, including Melissa, about choosing a bride.

The Druidess, out of all the others at court, was the most understanding to his feelings on the matter. It is also possible she saw into the future and learned how it would all play out. Whatever the case she supported Constantine in his choice.

Then, in early spring, reports came in from the eastern provinces sent by Maurice, the Viceroy who lived in Constantinople, the greatest city in the East in what is today Turkey, about a horde of nomadic warriors crossing from East Asia into Arthurian territory.

Called Avars by Maurice, in their own tongue they called themselves the Tuoba or Toba people. Originating in Northern China and tracing their ancestry back to the Mongolian plains, the Tuoba had lived in Northern China since the 4th century AD, intermarrying with the native Han Chinese while still retaining their distinct culture and language.

Why this army of the Tuoba was on the move Maurice wasn't sure, but they were making their way to Constantinople and he was requesting assistance as he did not believe he would be able to fend them off himself.

This made the Emperor worry. Maurice, an official for many years and a man of military experience, knew a threat when he saw one, and if he believed he couldn't hold the city with the excellent military capabilities the eastern half of the Empire possessed, the Tuoba's numbers must've been formidable.

Issuing orders out to Scotland, Wales, Cornwall, Ireland, and Gaul, the Emperor marshalled his nearest forces. Using Gwennan, a Magical ship created in Avalon he inherited from Arthur, Constantine was able to fit over three thousand warriors into it and sail for Gaul.

Here, met by the Gaulish High King, Chlothar, alongside the man's guardians Melora Pendragon and Prince Orlando, and Waroch II, King of Brittany, Constantine gathered more forces comprised of Franks, Romans, native Gauls, Bretons, and other Germanic warriors of various tribes before setting sail again to Asia Minor, reaching Constantinople by early May, a month before the Tuoba arrived.

The Emperor was warmly received by the Viceroy and the leading men of the city. These included Sergius, the Patriarch

of Constantinople, the head of the Eastern Orthodox Church. Bonus, a Roman nobleman and General of mixed Greek and Armenian descent, and Theodore, an Armenian of royal descent , belonging to the Arsacid dynasty, a royal House which ruled Armenia two hundred years before, who served as palace administrator, and finally Paul, the father of Maurice, who served as leader of the Council of Nobles, the advisory body that helped the Viceroy govern the provinces.

Taken to the Palace which served as home for Maurice and his family, Constantine, Melora, Orlando, and the Knights that accompanied them, were greeted by Maurice's wife Constantina and their eldest children.

Among these was the Viceroy's second child, Maria.

Close to Constantine's age at nineteen, Maria was small in stature, with long raven black hair and a dark complection, a trait she inherited from her mother as Constantina was an Iranian Princess, daughter of King Hormizd IV of Iran and his Khazar wife, the Khazars being a nomadic Turkic people from Central Asia.

Through her mother's paternal line Maria was descended from Kavad I, the first Iranian King to serve the Pendragon Dynasty, serving Arthur. She could claim descent through Kavad to the legendary Iranian Kings Cyrus the Great and Darius I, and Darius III who lost the Persian Empire to

Alexander the Great, and Queen Esther, the Jewish heroine from the Book of Esther in the Bible who, in turn, was descended from Saul, the first King of Israel.

Through her mother's maternal line Maria was the great granddaughter of Istami, a Chieftain of the Gokturks, a tribal group among the Khazars, and great great granddaughter of Tuwu, the first known Khan of the Khazars, who, so his family tradition said, descended from a she-wolf named Asena.

In actuality Asena saved Maria's ancestor, Bozkurt, as a young boy in Northern China. His village suffered a raid and his parents, along with most of the other villagers, were brutally slaughtered. Bozkurt survived by playing dead among the ashes where he, overcome by exhaustion, slipped into sleep.

Asena found him hours later and, contrary to what many would expect, nursed him as she would one of her pups. Bozkurt would grow up to become a strong warrior, forming his own tribe and his eldest son and Maria's ancestor, Yizhi Nishidu, would become the founder of the Gokturks.

Maria herself was well educated in Greek and Roman literature, the former having higher importance in the eastern half of the Arthurian Empire as Greek was the standard language. She was able to converse on various topics, including military matters, a surprising topic for an upper class Roman woman, but one she held her own on.

Constantine took a strong liking to her, and Maurice, seeing this chemistry, capitalized, doing whatever he could to get the two together, knowing the benefits and privileges his family would receive should they become members of the Pendragon Dynasty by marriage.

Maria's personality, a mix of compassionate concern for the poor, developed from her strong faith in the Eastern Orthodox Church, love of learning, and a fierce patriotism for the eastern Empire, made her an interesting and independent minded woman in an era where such things were, while not impossible to encounter, rare, and Constantine, himself open minded, found these things attractive. As Maurice planned the two spent a lot of time together during the lead up to the Tuoba arrival, growing closer.

Then, on June 1st, the Tuoba army reached Constantinople, thousands strong, their ranks bolstered by hundreds of Sclaveni warriors, members of Slavic tribes in the Balkans who decided to align themselves with the invaders in the hopes of breaking the Empire's hold on their mountainous homeland.

Constantine, Maurice, Sergius, Bonus, and Theodore, along with all of the Knights of the Round Table present, led the defense of the city from the walls, watching as the Tuoba and Sclaveni destroyed the Aqueduct of Valens before advancing on the city proper.

Throwing up ladders and shooting arrows into the Roman defenders the Tuoba and their Slavic allies besieged the city. They made dozens of attempts to breach the city walls by climbing up and overwhelming the defenders but each time the Emperor and his men (and a few women such as Melora), pushed them back, killing over a thousand within the first week of the siege alone.

Twelve hundred Roman soldiers under Bonus's command protected the right side of the wall, while Constantine and his Britons, equal in number, protected the center, and Maurice led eight thousand on the left, with smaller forces being held in reserve by other officials and military Captains.

It was a brutal siege, with the Tuoba bringing up siege weapons once it became clear simple might would not win them the day. As catapults smashed rocks and other missiles into the walls of Constantinople the Patriarch walked along them, holding up an icon of the Virgin Mary, praising the bravery of the Roman forces and reminding them to feel no remorse in killing their enemies as they were Pagans, men who did not know Christ.

One can only wonder what Constantine, a man who had friends who followed the Old Ways and who respected the older belief systems himself, made of this but if it offended him he kept quiet, not wishing to disrupt what was clearly

working.

By the end of June the Tuoba and Slavic armies were hanging on by threads, decimated in dozens of failed attacks on the Imperial walls, and the final defeat came the afternoon of June 30th when Constantine, gathering his Knights and any who would follow, led a charge outside the city walls, smashing into the horde of Tuoba and Slavic men, mowing them down underneath swords and hooves, forcing the rest to flee from the battlefield.

This charge broke the invading forces and they escaped into the Balkans, Constantine in pursuit. He spent all of July hunting down those who fled, taking no risks.

It was early August by the time the Emperor and his army returned to Constantinople, being welcomed back by Maurice and Constantina with a great feast.

At this feast the Viceroy, taking his chance, brought up marriage with Constantine, suggesting that he consider marrying Maria. The Emperor, having so far put such talk to the wayside, agreed.

In the days that followed the marriage agreement was solidified and Constantine returned to Britain to prepare for the wedding.

Two months later Maria and her parents arrived in Camelot

where she and Constantine were finally married by Melissa in the Imperial Palace, with all of the Emperor's cousins and friends in attendance.

At the end of the wedding ceremony Maria took her place on a throne beside Constantine and Melissa Crowned her Empress of Rome and Queen of Britain to the applause of all present.

Together Constantine and Maria had three children:

Guinevere, who was born in the Imperial palace on November 4th, 590. Guinevere Pendragon would later go on to marry Cuthwulf, a West Saxon nobleman and through their son Ceolwald, she would become an ancestor to Alfred the Great and thus the future Kings of England and Scotland and various Scottish Clans and their septs.

Maelgwyn, who was born in the Imperial palace sometime in September of 592. Maelgwyn would be Constantine's successor and all future Emperors would descend from him. Once the Arthurian Empire fell in 683 his descendants ruled the Kingdom of Gwynedd in Wales.

And the youngest child of Constantine and Maria was Bledric, born in 595. He would be given the Kingship of Cornwall by his father and served both him and Maelgwyn faithfully as a General and Knight of the Round Table for many years.

Bledric's descendants would hold the Kingship, and later Lordship, of Cornwall well into the 11th century.

Constantine and Maria enjoyed a happy marriage, bringing the 'blessings' so to speak to Maurice's family as he'd hoped as well. The invasion of the Tuoba also sparked an interest in China from the Emperor and he would spend years studying its history and making contact with several Chinese men of standing.

One of these, Li Yuan, Duke of Tang, would become a close pen friend of Constantine in the late 590s and in early 600 he visited Camelot in person, the first Chinese noble ever to do so. This meeting went well and the two remained close friends, which would, in time, change Chinese history, but that is a story for another time.

The Story of Tristan and Iseult

Lyonesse, a country close to Cornwall and the Island of Scilly, was ruled by a Royal House of Cornish stock, sharing ancestry with the Kings of Cornwall, and had close ties to the British mainland.

Its King in the early 580s was Meliodas, son of Rivalen, a renowned and accomplished Knight. His father had served under Arthur Pendragon during the King of Britain's conquests of Ireland, Gaul, and Rome, earning Arthur's favor which extended to Meliodas when the young man rose to the throne.

In spring of 583 Meliodas traveled to Cornwall to visit a friend of his, Mark Cunomorus, Lord of Tintagel Castle. The two dined together, drank much wine and talked about their futures.

Mark, dreaming of joining the Round Table Order, stated his goal plainly. He admired the Pendragon Kings and wished to become a Lord of a larger territory than one castle.

Meliodas for his part simply wanted a family.

To this Mark humoursly suggested he consider marrying his sister Elizabeth. This joke would turn out to be prophetic as Meliodas and Elizabeth, meeting soon thereafter, did fall in love.

The couple married in 585 and they returned to Meliodas' Kingdom where they established a loving home. Elizabeth soon fell pregnant and Meliodas, if it turned out to be a baby boy, wanted to name him Tristan after his grandfather.

While he would become father to a son named Tristan,

Meliodas never got the chance to meet him. A few months after Elizabeth became pregnant war broke out between Arthur and his nephew Mordred, pulling Lyonesse into it.

The young King and husband marched off to support his Overlord, pledging to return when he could.

Meliodas was killed, like most of Arthur's men, on the blood slick fields of Camlann, slain by a Welsh Duke named Morgan.

Word was slow to reach Lyonesse but when it did it left Elizabeth shattered. She continued to live for her unborn child's sake but inside she was slowly wasting away.

In January of 586 she gave birth to a son whom she named Tristan as Meliodas wished, but, having lost much of her will to live Elizabeth did not survive long, only enough to hug and kiss her son, saying,

"Little boy of mine, I have longed to meet you, and you are the most cherished thing in my life. I pray you live a good life my son. One untouched by the sadness I have known."

Elizabeth kissed Tristan's forehead again, passing away with him still in her arms.

Rabard, the family's loyal butler, took the Prince and decided to raise him as best he could outside the machinations and rivalries of the Royal Lyonesse Court for fear a power hungry noble might kill him.

The butler pretended the child died with the mother and took him to his home outside the capital city of Kanoel where, alongside their four other sons, Rabard and his wife raised Tristan.

Seven years past like this, Tristan coming to learn how to speak Gaulish as this was the mother tongue of Rabard and his wife as they were Gauls from what is today Southern France.

Believing the boy needed to learn the ways of the sword if he were to follow in his father's footsteps one day Rabard hired another Gaul, Govenal, to teach him the ways of combat.

This Govenal did with great vigor and dedication. A lifelong soldier, having fought against and then for Arthur Pendragon in the past, Govenal passed down all of his experience to the young Tristan, the boy coming to love sword fighting above all other arts, a trait Rabard believed he inherited from Meliodas.

Apart from combat Govenal instilled in Tristan the love of honesty, fairness, and kindness, the hallmarks of Arthur's reign. He taught him to never lie, even in the most dire situations. To be a Knight worthy of the Pendragon crest he needed to be trustworthy, forthright, and committed to the people of the vast Empire Arthur created.

As Tristan grew into his teenage years he began to resemble

his mother, something Rabard made sure to tell him often as the boy had many questions about his parents. Rabard by this time considered him as much his son as his Lord and did whatever he could to make the Prince happy, as did his adopted siblings and mother.

And it all came crashing down in one day.

On May 22nd, 601, while playing with the family dog by the beach, Tristan was spotted by Norse slavers. They came ashore and overpowered the boy who, despite his intense training, could not overpower ten fully grown men.

Taken back to their longship Tristan was bound and gagged by his captors who hoped to sell him in Asia on the vast slave markets there. Their leader, a man called Snaer the Hawk, made a point of terrorizing the youth with stories of rape and torment, getting a thrill from the horror reflected in the boy's eyes.

However the sea spirits can be a fickle bunch, and Aegir, one of the many deities who watches over the ocean, did not kindly to this kidnapping.

For eight days and nights the God hammered the ship with rain and strong winds, claiming four Norse slavers as prizes during this time, including Snaer, who was ripped from the ship by a long tentacled hand during the sixth night, his frantic

screams swallowed by the raging waves.

By the ninth day the surviving slavers decided it was too risky to take the boy further and dropped him off along the coast of Cornwall with a pack of rations.

Tristan wandered aimlessly from the Cornish coast, using the skills Govenal taught him to catch game wherever he could. This continued for three days until, quite suddenly, he stumbled into a hunting party led by Romulus Varus, a Cornish Knight of Roman descent, son of settlers from Rome.

Romulus stopped in front of the boy, bewildered by his sudden appearance. He asked him who he was and Tristan answered that he was the son of King Meliodas and Queen Elizabeth of Lyonesse.

This almost took Romulus out of his saddle, for he served Mark, now King of Cornwall, having been appointed to the position by Constantine Pendragon II after he came to the Imperial throne, and all believed the child died with Elizabeth.

After several more pressing questions Romulus, satisified the teenager spoke the truth, took the young Tristan back to Tintagel Castle to see Mark.

King Mark, amazed to have his sister's son in his Castle, threw Tristan a grand feast, celebrating this family reunion. He

appointed Romulus as the boy's guardian and promptly sent a message to Lyonesse to assure Rabard and his wife Tristan was safe.

The Cornish monarch sat his nephew beside him during the evening's festivities which capped off with a Bard from Wales retelling the stories of Maximus Pendragon, founder of the House of Pendragon, in Armorica.

His skill impressed Tristan who commented how the finest storytellers in Lyonesse paled in comparison. Mark suggested he try, and so the boy did, his singing touching the hearts of all the nobles present.

When Tristan finished the King gave a final speech thanking God for sending his nephew to him and bringing memories back memories of dear Elizabeth.

That night Tristan swore an oath of fealty to his uncle, promising to serve him faithfully. To this end he continued his martial training under Romulus. Three pleasant years passed this way, Tristan coming to form close bonds with Varus and the King, even being named a possible successor to the throne should Mark not produce heirs.

In the third year of his stay in Cornwall the High King of Ireland, Aed MacDomnall, sent a messenger, a tall Knight in his employ named Morholt, to ask Mark for his friendship on

the condition he recognized Irish superiority to the Cornish.

It was a tired joke. One Aed played during his first year as High King, then the second year, and now then. No one knew the exact reason for it, other than to stir up ill feelings, not that there was much anyone could do given both Cornwall and Ireland were a part of the Arthurian Empire.

Morholt was Aed's brother in law, a Gaul who had long lived among the Irish people. He carried himself well, confident and with courage into the main hall of Tintagel where Mark received him.

Morholt took them all by surprise. He offered single combat to prove the Irish were superior to the Cornish. While open warfare was illegal under Arthurian law, duels were fair game, and so Aed wanted to settle matters this way. Apparently it made little difference that Morholt wasn't Irish by blood to Aed.

None of the Cornish noblemen nor the King took up the challenge, until Tristan stepped forward. He bowed to his uncle and said,

"Lord, allow me to fight on Cornwall's behalf."

Before Mark could respond Tristan rose and threw down his gauntlet, officially taking up the duel.

The next day it was held on the Islet of St. Samson, the

customary place in Cornwall where duels took place, Mark and his entourage escorting Tristan there, none believing the boy stood much chance.

They left him there, Mark unable to watch his nephew die, but a few hours later Tristan appeared back at the Royal Court, bloodied and soaked in sweat but very much alive. The head of Morholt in his hand. He placed it at Mark's feet,

"My Lord, Morholt fought well. He cracked my sword and nearly took my head but God was with me and I slew him. Send back his head to Ireland, uncle, and let all men know the Cornish are the mightiest of all the Celtic Race."

The nobles cheered as Mark embraced his nephew, more proud than ever to call him such.

Morholt's head was sent back and received by Aed at the capital of Tara with much distress. Morholt's niece, Iseult, was Aed's eldest daughter, and when she heard of the name of the boy who slew her uncle, she hated him and swore never to forgive him as long as she lived.

A few months later, while hunting with Romulus and other friends, Tristan received a grievous wound to his midsection by a stag's antlers while trying to sneak up upon the poor creature.

Believing he was mortally wounded Mark laid Tristan up in his

room for a time but soon the Prince asked to be allowed to sail on the seas one last time as he was fond of the water.

The King gave in to this request, lying Tristan down in a boat and pushed him out to sea.

Here again Aegir entered Tristan's life, the Sea God gently guiding the boat along until it came to the Irish village whose name translated from Gaelic as Whitehaven, the village Morholt called home.

At the time of Tristan's arrival the village was conducting a ritual for the departed Knight and among their number was Princess Iseult.

Fishermen found Tristan's boat first, hauling him, amazingly still alive, from it and into the town where they asked Lady Iseult, skilled in medicine and Magic, to attempt to save his life.

Had she known who she was about to aid it is likely the Princess would have finished Tristan off herself, but being kind and attentive to most people Iseult agreed immediately to help.

For two months Tristan remained in Iseult's care, slowly getting back to good health. Once his senses came back to him fully he realized he was in Ireland and took precautions to protect his identity should any of Morholt's men want

revenge.

He spun a tale of how he was a Seer from Spain called John of Cordoba. He was, he said, on his way to China when the seas turned foul and drove him ashore. He claimed he did not know he received his serious wound, having lost consciousness on the shore.

His story was believed, and once he fully recovered he returned to Cornwall, eager to escape the dangers of Ireland.

But things were not safe in the Cornish Court either, as several nobles were outraged by the Prince's return. Led by Andret, the group of men conspired against Tristan, twisting the minds of others against him in the hopes that once Mark passed way Andret might usurp the Crown.

Together the men convinced Mark to take a wife and arranged for him to marry Iseult. They hoped if he fathered a child with her he would demote Tristan and it would be easier to pick him off before moving against the King.

To escort Iseult to Cornwall Mark chose Tristan, outfitting a ship expressly for the purpose and giving him the command of one hundred Knights.

Tristan, uneasy at this request, followed orders regardless, taking command of the ship and setting sail for Irish shores. It is unknown if Iseult knew he was coming, but once it became

known he was her escort she refused to even meet him no matter how much her father prodded her.

Tristan, growing uneasy at how long this task was taking, devised a plan. Using a spell concocted by a Druid in the employ of the Irish High King he transformed himself into a slender and beautiful woman. Taking the name Gormlaith the Cornish Knight managed to convinced the Princess to open the door to her chambers on the pretext 'she' was there to report on Prince Tristan's leaving.

Once inside Tristan sat down with Iseult and the two talked about many things, the Princess growing to trust the young serving girl despite the fact they only just met, 'her' personality being too strong to resist. An hour into the conversation Tristan, feeling confident he made his point, threw off his disguise by drinking an antidote, revealing his true form.

Aghast at this deception and recognizing 'John', Iseult tried attacking him but this went as well as you may expect. Tristan easily held her off all the while pleading with her to listen to him. Eventually, after wearing herself down, the Princess did.

Tristan explained how Morholt wanted to duel. It was his desire to fight. He died a true warrior, not cut down in some unfair skirmish or ambush. Tristan praised his courage, expressing sorrow at how the fight needed to end the way it

did.

By the end of his explanation Iseult's feelings of hatred and anger, while not completely vanishing, began to cool, replaced by a subtle interest.

Tristan was able to convince her to accompany him back to Cornwall and the next day they set sail for Britain, the Princess and Prince passing the time by engaging in conversation, breaking down the final walls between them.

By the time they reached Cornish shores Iseult's hatred for Tristan was gone, replaced now by an attraction she couldn't explain. For his part Tristan noticed but, loyal to his uncle, remained platonic with the Princess.

The marriage of Iseult and King Mark took place three days after her arrival in the Kingdom, filled with great pomp and lavish celebration. Among the most illustrious guests were King Constantine Pendragon and other notables of the Imperial Court. Tristan served as head of security, guarding Tintagel with Romulus and other Knights.

At first it seemed it was a good match. Iseult, though much younger than her husband, was mature beyond her years, offering advice in political matters and acting as a good hostess when foreign diplomats or Imperial officials visited the Kingdom, but over time it became apparent to all that

Lady Iseult's love was for Tristan, her attempts at hiding it proving to be insufficient, but Mark bore it well, for a time at least, hoping it would pass.

It never did, and as the months went on it became more difficult for Tristan to ignore his feelings for the Queen, conflicting with his fierce loyalty to his uncle, slowly driving him to the point of madness.

Unable to bear it any longer Tristan confessed his love to Iseult one night while his uncle and most of the other Knights were out making the rounds through the villages to meet with Chieftains.

Overjoyed at his confession Iseult threw herself at him and the two embraced in a long kiss, one that led to more until they found themselves in bed together.

Unbeknownst to either of them a servant of Mark, Melot, an old and wretched man who detested Tristan for reasons no one precisely knew, watched them through the door.

For the next week Melot spied on the Queen and King Mark's Paladin as they met in secret every night, planning to expose them to the King once he returned.

When Mark did come back to Tintagel Melot waited until evening, when both Iseult and Tristan were gone to bed, to talk with his Lord alone.

He told Mark of Iseult's infidelity, outlining how for the past week she had met with a lover behind the King's back, leaving the identity of the man for last, savouring the look of pained betrayal on Mark's face, knowing it spelled the end of Tristan.

To prove his case Melot convinced the King to pretend to leave for Camelot for a few weeks and sneak back later in the night to catch the two lovers.

Mark did this, and just as Melot promised he would, the King caught Iseult and Tristan in the act of lovemaking in his nephew's quarters.

Heartbroken and furious at this treachery Mark ordered Tristan to be dragged before a tribunal of his peers in the morning where he would stand trial for his crimes. As for Iseult she was shamed and sent back to her father where Aed, disgusted at her behavior, locked her away in an Abbey.

The following morning Tristan, draped in rags, stood before King Mark, Romulus, and two other senior Knights to answer for his crimes.

Little more than a formality as all knew he was guilty, Tristan did not defend himself, openly admitting to his affair with the Queen but swearing undying loyalty to Mark and the Cornish people all the same. Adament it had not changed.

To honour his nephew's service up to this point Mark allowed

Tristan to choose the method of his execution.

He chose a duel, as he wished to die with a sword in his hands. Mark granted this request and promised if he survived he could go free.

But the King ensured he would not by selecting twenty Knights to be his opponents, including himself and Romulus.

Tristan accepted these terms and was taken away, the duel to be held on the same Islet he slew Morholt on the next day.

When the morning came Tristan donned his armour, took up his sword, and sailed to the islet to meet his possible executioners.

It was a long battle, Tristan slaying eight of his opponents, proving to all he was Cornwall's greatest Knight, but even so he grew tired eventually and Mark, helped by Romulus, mortally wounded him with a blow to his abdomen.

Holding his guts in Tristan slumped to his knees, staring up at his uncle.

"I'm sorry."

He said.

Mark gave no forgiveness. Cutting off his head.

Tristan was left to rot where he lie but sympathetic friends

ventured to the islet later in the night and gave him a proper burial on the mainland.

News of his death reached Ireland two days later, Aed reluctant to tell Iseult, but the Princess discovered it anyway through gossiping nuns.

She stopped eating and drinking, refusing contact with anyone, spending her nights praying to God to take her life so she could be with Tristan again.

Ten days after Tristan's execution God answered Iseult's prayers, she died peacefully in her sleep just shy of morning's light.